

A Project by Jerrilynn D Dodds and Ed Grazda

nymasjid

the book of M O S Q U E S ONLY NEW Y O R K



the MOSQUE of UNIVERSITY NEW YORK

A Project by Jerrilynn D Dodds
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Malcolm Shabazz Mosque, New York City

Masjid Baitul Mukarram, Astoria, Queens



Masjid Al Abdin, Richmond Hills, Queens

by
Jerrilynn D.
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The Deeds of the Mosque: Problems for the Study of Islamic Architecture in New York

Fragments from a Fieldwork Journal: This project took root on February 26, 1993. It pushed through the ruins of an urban crisis: the explosion which tore into the foundations of the World Trade Center. That winter, the city seemed collectively frozen in a stricken gaze at the gaping hole in this mammoth, bland monument to its own economy; the lean, prosaic, and once immutable landmark was lamed, and shaken. But ultimately more destructive to the city as a whole than the charred girders and crumbled columns were tidal waves of toxic and reductive one-line headlines that followed in the written and televised media. They straddled photo after photo of shredded concrete and singed flesh, words and images that met the gaze of New Yorkers for two long winter months. I think that, finally, it was the phrase "Muslim Terrorist" that left the deepest wound; the constant fraternalizing of the two words created the sense that they were bound, like secret synonyms. They floated through the news media together, leaving a kind of easy, familiar ideological detritus behind for the city to feed upon. Before I began this project together with Ed Grazda and a team of young architects and designers,¹ my scholarship was largely evangelical. I had worked in Medieval borderlands, and wrote about buildings which were the dispossessed of architectural academe. It had been an intellectual position, a kind of discursive rescue, easily perpetrated upon patrons and communities muted by history. And so I entered the study of

the Mosques of New York as well with a clear view of rescue; of countering images of wrenched metal beams and blackened cars with whole buildings, restored and new-built, teaming with peaceful, constructive communities. But I don't think that I recognized then how that position, conceived to be at once heroic and benevolent, exteriorized these buildings and their communities, as if they were part of another New York, as if they were other to my own urban experience, my city. I had failed to recognize this rather insidious missionary brand of intellectual hegemony until these positions were challenged carefully, thoughtfully, and relentlessly by members of the very communities I had set out to save. The first step in my education, was to put the enterprise of the making of architecture in a certain amount of perspective.

Masjid al Ber: "We all worked incredibly hard to make this mosque happen," Muhammed Said said. "We worked extra jobs; everyone in the community sacrificed. But it was not really a sacrifice, because the mosque brings everything to us." "How does this place bring you everything?" I asked. Muhammed looked at me incredulously. "It is not the place," he sighed with the exasperation of a parent or teacher whose patience is tested. "It is the mosque. Everyone knows that a mosque is not a building."

Masjid Al Aman: Imam Muhammed Rahman: "After this, after 'Allah Akbar' there is no thought other than prayer, no view or gaze aside from the activities of prayer. There is only complete concentration. You are far from the cares and demands of your life. Architecture is the least of the things you have forgotten."

Masjid Sayyed Jamal 'Udin: One of the founders of this Masjid which was begun by immigrants from Afghanistan, Nisar Zuri saw it move from a tiny rented space in Bayside, to a location on Sanford Avenue and finally to its present location at 149 Cherry Avenue in Flushing. "In Bayside," Mr. Zuri remembered, "kids would throw rocks at the windows. They wrote graffiti against Islam. We would clean it. They would repeat it. Finally we tried to write the name of the mosque so that people might not notice. But even that was destroyed. I would get quite upset, but the other community members were understanding. They said 'This is only a building. And we are in their own country; their own neighborhood..we are in somebody else's neighborhood and we seem like strangers.'" "I was surprised," Mr. Zuri continued, "that, after the Russians, my people could have such forgiveness, such insight."

Bosnian Cultural Center: Hasan Deljaanin, is the treasurer of the Bosnian Cultural Center in Queens. He is proud of the two family house, which the community bought and converted into a mosque, meeting place and apartments for the Imam and students. "We started in 1990, and little by little we raised enough money in the community. A lot of people were surprised, because we were able to do it the proper way, without a mortgage. In Islam, you must not take a mortgage, not pay interest in purchasing a mosque. That would be usury. In New York that is an accomplishment." "He is the best businessman in the ummah" the Imam, Bayram Mulic remarked proudly. "All the ideas for the mosque's design were determined in consultation with the community. Somebody said, 'I will do the stairs,' then somebody said, 'I will do the painting.' Nobody knew exactly how it would look until the end. So you see that in the end, Allah did this."

Masjid Al Abidin: Imam Sattur: "Those domes?" he said dispassionately, as if he had forgotten the existence of the five swelling silver domes that anchored the flat-roofed, corner building in Richmond Hill. "Really, this architecture does not concern us. It has nothing to do with the past; it does not reflect any idea or decision. The dome was the choice of the man who paid for the renovation. That is all."

Masjid al Ber: "Are you done with your questions?" Muhammed asked, after we had spoken at some length for the second time. "Good. Now I would like to ask you some questions. Do you believe in God? How is it that you can know all these things about Islam, care about its culture and architecture, and not be a Muslim?"

Islamic Cultural Center: Aisha, a woman with whom I became acquainted while attending prayer was joyous and incredulous at once: "Don't you feel when you are here how beautiful Islam is? You have watched us pray so many times. How is it you are not tempted to become a Muslim? Is it the building which distracts you?"

Islamic Cultural Center: Imam Osman: "Architecture, of course, means nothing in Islam. This building is very attractive. It is built by a Christian architect. But that means nothing. We are in America now, where people are interested in judging people through their architecture. This is not really our way. But I think that this can be seen as a new era for the mosque. Since this is America the mosque should be made in an architectural language that Americans understand."

"But that of course has nothing to do with Islam. For us, it is in our submission to God, to His will, that we find our identity. We are then, in prayer, outside of time, outside of place."

Schomburg Center: Aisha Al-Adawiya: "The most beautiful mosques are recognized by the way they care for their communities. A mosque ought to be a community center, it ought to be the place where people are helped to find jobs, or care or homes. Sometimes when I look at the grandest mosque buildings, I wonder if an elaborate building does not mean that someone, somewhere is being neglected."

Masjid al Falah; Dr. Rashid: "Please, Professor. Stop asking questions about Architecture. It is the deeds of the mosque; the deeds which make a mosque."

The Masjid in New York "The earth has been made to me a mosque" [A hadith of the Prophet Muhammed] There are over 70 other mosques in the five boroughs of New York City, of which no more than a half dozen can be said to have been designed as mosques from the outset. The rest are storefront buildings, lofts, stores or warehouses that have been converted to mosques to serve communities that are the result of the impressive diaspora of the past two decades from dozens of Islamic countries to the United States, and an active African American community that observes orthodox Islam as a religion and way of life.² The buildings range in cost and scale from the Islamic Cultural Center to tiny prayer halls carved out of brownstones and

warehouses. They embrace a breathtaking ethnic, social and economic diversity. Only in a discussion limited entirely to architecture would Masjid, or mosque, be understood as a building. A mosque is composed of an Islamic community, the ummah, and the functions which nurture and support it. In *Aljumuah*, a monthly journal published by the Islamic Revival Association U.S.A.,³ the role of the Masjid is defined in terms of thirteen functions, only one of which involves providing a place for prayer: among others figure the teaching of religious and worldly affairs, the acquisition of knowledge and education of community members, the housing of poor Muslims, the collection and distribution of charity, holding of consultative meetings—or Shura councils, and importantly, the building of community. Prayer in a mosque is, in fact, part of its function of forming and upholding the concept of community. For in Islam, the mosque is the sight of communal prayer, so that the community can feel its breadth and unity. Prayer occurs five times a day; it can take place in a mosque, but also in virtually any other place which is clean. One can pray at home, or at work, in a church or synagogue if need be. But there is a particular mandate for the community to assemble in a mosque on Friday for midday prayer, called Juma., when the Imam will lead prayer and give a sermon. In New York, a place where Islamic identity, and the feeling of commonly held religious concerns for Muslims is dispersed and translucent in the workplace and on the street, the experience of communal prayer and the sense of community it brings is enormously important. The construction of a mosque building is a separate issue from the formation of a community. The architectural enterprise of a mosque is accomplished by a lay group, the Shura, a council of congregation members responsible for the financing, and virtually all practical and organizational concerns surrounding the mosque and its decoration. Clergy are on the whole expected to isolate themselves from such material issues, although their participation varies with each community. Since according to Islamic law the purchase, maintenance and upkeep of the building must be financed without payment of any interest, the founding of a mosque can represent enormous community effort and sacrifice. Because of the issues surrounding the making of community and the purposeful remoteness of the institution's sacred functions from architectural typology, new mosque foundations in New York can be spaces whose architectural

expression is enormously discrete and restricted. Some are experienced almost exclusively as interiors; as unadorned, protected spaces which harbor a community otherwise dispersed in the city fabric. These carry very subtle and limited exterior markers pertaining to Islamic identity. Primarily places for prayer at the outset, they illustrate the extent to which experience is privileged over expression in the early foundation of mosque. The actual architectural requirements for a mosque are thus quite limited and include no symbolic forms. Minarets, which have functioned traditionally as markers for the presence of Islam in communities or as the site from which the Muezzin makes the adhan, or call to prayer, are common for new built mosques—especially those constructed with a view to mark an exterior identity—but are on no occasion necessary. Other monumental forms such as domes and arches can carry particular cultural meanings, especially in the West, but have no intrinsic universal association with Islam. Any mosque congregation in New York City must, however confront three architectural concerns common to any ethnic or linguistic group which seeks to establish a mosque: the separation of the sexes during prayer, the unacceptability of images in the mosque, and qiblation (the orientation of prayer in the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca). The formal means of separating men from women here takes on particular importance because it is a social and religious custom so imperiled in the images and practice of every day life in New York. At New York's Indonesian mosque men and women pray in a hall which is split by a partition drawn perpendicular to the qibla, placing them equidistant from it, side by side; at the Fatih Camii in Brooklyn a movable screen at the back of the prayer hall can expand and contract with the number of women or men attending. The Islamic cultural center in Manhattan and the new mosque constructed by Staten Island's Albanian community were designed with elaborate tribunes and balconies, and in a large number of storefront mosques a separate room or an entire floor is dedicated to women, with a PA system—or in the case of the more prosperous Bosnian mosque: closed circuit TV, to insure that they are able to hear the khutbah, or sermon, delivered during Juma. Technology and building funds become the means by which separation can be made more comfortable, but also at times more complete, and more rigidly codified into the architectural structure. For nearly every immigrant congregation we spoke with during this study, the separation of the sexes had a heightened meaning in an un-

died, secular New York, and the separation was at times defined architecturally in a more restrictive way than in an immigrant's Islamic home country. In some mosques begun in African American communities, like Masjid Malcolm Shabazz or Masjid Taqwa wa Jihad, women pray in the same space as men, but at a distance, and behind them. "This does not reflect an inferior status for women, but is an issue of modesty," Imam Osman of the Islamic Cultural Center explained. "I assure you this is not a question of hierarchy or dominance," reflects Aisha Al Adawiya of the Schomburg center in Harlem. "We simply should not be regarded from behind while at prayer." Indeed, the interchange between American born Muslims and immigrant Muslims has created a discourse in which issues like those pertaining to the liberties of women—cultural issues which have at times been linked to Islam or legitimized by association with Islamic doctrine—are separated out. When the crowd at one mosque filled to overflow for prayers at the feast of ID, an African American Muslim woman, hands on hips, faced off a mosque functionary in Brooklyn: "I'm an American and a Muslim: you can't tell me there is only room left for men to pray." "Though cultural traditions vary, there is nothing in Islam itself that suggests women ought to be shut away in separate rooms, or excluded from Juma; what is required is simply separation of the sexes." Ms. Adawiya continued. "Part of what happens in a mosque ought to be the education of all American Muslims about these and other social and political issues." Aniconism is a more shrouded issue for new mosque foundations in New York, but a serious one. All decoration in any mosque must exclude any representations of animate beings, which in Islam can only be conceived and created by God. This on the surface would seem a difficult restriction to embrace in New York, a city whose public spaces bristle with images and narratives. But the creation of spaces in which there is no narrative in which to project oneself, no figure with whom to identify emotionally, privileges the private, meditative acts performed within the mosque over their surroundings. Finally qiblation offers an intrinsic defiance of New York's relentless grid that is, interestingly, less often exploited as a public, exterior gesture than one might imagine. It can be marked in New York with the rotation of an entire building, as in the case of the Islamic Cultural Center of Manhattan or the Masjid al Falah in Richmond Hill, Queens, or with the rotation of the congregation itself within an existing building as

in Fatih Cami or the Masjid al Farooq in Brooklyn. When it is not accomplished by the rotation of the entire building, qiblation can be indicated by a Mihrab, a niche indicating the wall facing the Kaaba in Mecca, or simply by lines drawn along a floor or carpet. Qiblation is common to all mosques in the world, and clearly is meant to reorient worshippers, dislodge them from a familiar, worldly context to better mind the dictates of prayer and the wider community of Islam. Diaspora congregants however can at times give it an additional meaning, one that clings to the notion of the transcendence of Islam: "We do not pray to Atlantic Avenue" a congregant at Masjid al Farooq once told me: "we pray to Mecca". Or as a taxi driver from Bangladesh pronounced proudly: "At the Masjid, third Avenue comes to its knees." There is no central administration that coordinates or oversees the mosques of New York; no hierarchy among mosques, no central advisory or governing council. The community of a particular mosque can be in no way restricted; however congregations in New York City tend to reflect neighborhood demographics and the languages in which the Khutbah, or Friday sermon, is given.⁴ In an number of cases, the communities studied in this project were isolated or embattled, and uncomprehending of our concern with less presupposing building spaces.⁵ In a number of the newer communities, there was a natural reticence to inquiries from the outside, concerns which were often voiced in terms of religious ideology. Most of the congregations approached in this study had experienced harassment and vandalism of some sort at some moment in their histories, and many had become particularly insular after the media campaigns following the World Trade Center Bombings. For one large and established congregation, the covert insertion of a government agent in the mosque community had hardened some prominent community members into a firmly polarized position. After a number of unanswered calls and failed appointments one congregant asked me bitterly: "Why do you come to us? Why must you write about this mosque? Why don't you go and write about a church, or a synagogue instead?" What kind of dialogue does such an embattled stance create with the urban context of a mosque? Historians and

sociologists within New York have charted the settlement histories of various new religious minorities—early German protestants, Catholics and Jews in particular, histories that usually begin with an initial place of prayer established in a storefront or reused architectural space. Severe economic restrictions suggest that all of these spaces be makeshift and even austere at the outset. However, this initial exigency is steeped in ideology within diaspora Islam, meanings which cling to the function of mosques even as economic and social pressures ease. Architecture has no Meaning "Of course, the architecture of the mosque has no meaning" Imam Osman of the Islamic Cultural center in New York once told me quite deliberately. "In prayer all external concerns must vanish." This position, which I have heard dozens of times from Imams, congregants and Shura council members in mosques in New York city, lies I think, at the heart of any study of mosque architecture in the recent Muslim diaspora. The separation of the act of worship from the material creation of the mosque is a fact that needs to be reasserted in particular in New York—in particular for non-Muslim New Yorkers, who tend to fetishize architecture and canonize architects; who live in a place in which cultural authority has laid claim to countless abandoned spiritual territories. This separation of the cultural content of architecture from its spiritual and community functions is essentially the case for any mosque, no matter what the financial conditions of its foundation, or the willingness of the community to embark on a monumental enterprise at the moment of creating a new mosque building. No matter how assimilated the community; no matter how grand the architectural gesture, the forms and materials that spring from formal and aesthetic considerations around the building: its decoration, its signage, its profile in the cityscape, are matters considered separately from the mosque's principal functions: completely independent of prayer, and the community services and spaces that are embraced within the mosque building. For in Islam prayer implies that all consciousness is focused on God; one submits completely to God. It is an act out of time; it is not considered possible that any physical surrounding hasten or encourage this shutting out of the world. Images and symbols are distractions; just as the the presence of the opposite sex is a distraction. Thus the act of making an elaborate building is rarely one which concerns the Imam, who leads prayer and is the spiritual leader of larger communities.



Gawsiah Jam E Masjid, Astoria, Queens



Masjid Al Farooq, Brooklyn



Muslim World Day Parade, Madison Avenue, New York City

That kind of action is initiated by Shura council members, community leaders who are the mediators of the mosque in the urban economy and the urban fabric as well. However in New York's newest, immigrant communities, and at times in its most conservative or political ones, prayer halls can be staggeringly simple; almost negligently austere: walls stripped bare and painted white, with the qibla indicated only by masking tape lines laid out on a carpet. In the most recent foundations the austerity of these places of prayer might on one hand be rooted in economic exigency, but it is expressed in the language of religious ideology. Imams and community members who are asked about architectural space and ornamentation respond that austerity is purposeful. "Architecture is the least of the things you have forgotten (in prayer):"⁶ "We are not concerned with the building. In Islam, Architecture has no meaning; it does not have significance."⁷ Among the newest and least assimilated communities, this formal restraint can also take on political meaning. It can carry, not only a traditional religious meaning, but resistance to the city's public skin, the visual noise of its secular and commercial culture. An overt concern with the physical and formal character of architecture

can be positioned with a consumerist ethic that is perceived as a kind of colonization: a form of internal cultural invasion. "The mosque shuts out the commercial world, the world that tempts you to buy, to be wasteful, to be too proud of possessions; to forget the Muslim education of your children in this world of advertisements which are Haram, which tempt you to spend too much. All of these things turn your mind away from God."⁸ I had come to this project expecting resistance, both among predominantly immigrant and indigenous American Islamic communities, one rooted in an experience of imperiled identity for Muslims in the face of the juggernaut of secular and consumer visual culture which comes to be the public face of much of the city. And I had anticipated as well that architecture would be one of the terms in which resistance was expressed and worked through. But I expected that somehow history and national, ethnic tradition would be the means by which resistance would be given visual expression: that a search for historical roots would become the visual rallying point for the collective identity of a displaced—or replaced—community. It was some time before I saw that the architectural discourse itself was at stake for many new com-

munities. In New York—a city painted with images and narratives, in which the walls of buses and subways stare back at you, admonish you to buy; in which buildings have faces and names, a city of jarring tabloid journalism, infinite cable channels, billboards, whole street walls as temples to the rhetorical figural image—in New York, consider how much power is inherent in rejecting the whole issue of art and architecture's cultural authority... of rejecting a study that privileges architecture as a way of understanding Islam. Formal austerity can be a way of seizing a conventional American poetics of architecture and turning it on its ear. As a position, it constitutes a kind of assertion of the immutability of Islam under siege in New York's vast cacophony of material visual noise; or protection from being locked in the relativist gaze: "Professor please stop asking about architecture, Architecture means nothing."⁹

4. Ethnic Tradition:

The use of visual forms that mark a particular ethnic or national group or an identifiable historical tradition is, in fact, somewhat rare among the mosques of New York, and it is not evident as a conscious position in any of the new built mosques. Perhaps the expecta-

tion of urban expressions of ethnic tradition, in which identity is rooted in history, is part of a search for "pure products"¹⁰, a kind of construct in which a collective identity remains tied to a nostalgic notion of otherness linked to a frozen, traditional past. It is a paradigm that does not fit New York's burgeoning landscape, does not admit the growth and the ambivalence which are always present in displacement, in the grafting of different identities to create a third, new one. The two communities which have consciously used traditional or ethnic reference—Fatih Camii in Brooklyn and the Bosnian Cultural Center in Astoria, are neither embattled nor resistant. Their adoption of traditional form for each has a different motivation. They are both fairly prosperous and assimilated communities which made a collective decision to decorate newly acquired and larger buildings in a style that speaks of the complexity and multiplicity of identities within Islam, rather than the immutability and visual inscrutability of a more embattled Islam of the earlier, simpler mosques. The United American Muslim Association, which administers Fatih Camii, faced a need to find a space large enough to hold their entire community during prayer, a number that could grow from 400 during normal Juma, to over a thousand during the month of Ramadan. In 1981

they purchased a Sunset Park, Brooklyn, building which had previously served as a theater, then as a church. At the time of its purchase it was in ruins: the roof was in the process of collapsing, and the window frames and doors all had to be replaced. The transformation, which was a significant one, is represented by the Imam as a prosaic act remote from the mosque itself. He prefers to define the mosque in terms of its weekend school for children, a dormitory for visiting students from Turkey, rooms for ceremonies and celebrations, a night school for adults and an office which publishes a religious and cultural magazine. From Fatih Camii's neat, ample lobby one passes today beneath a tiled sign into a voluminous space beneath a shallow stucco dome. This is the prayer hall, a gathering place that had once been the auditorium of the old converted theater, its seats and screen long removed. Susan Slyomovics has observed elsewhere how the reorientation of the original theater building becomes a kind of repossession of its American Orientalist decoration.¹¹ Those entering at first find themselves facing the theater's former stage, which has become a gallery for the women of the congregation; it is the back of the prayer hall, separated from the men's section by

movable screens. In changing the theater into a mosque, the orientation of its principal space has been reversed—refocused in the direction of the qibla wall: the wall facing Mecca. It is in turning to face Mecca that one's experience of this reinvented space is completed: a mural of painted Iznik tiles transform the qibla wall with Ottoman arabesque, interlace patterns and bold, cursive inscriptions. This rich and luminous decoration, so anomalous to Sunset Park's patchwork of faded noble structures and newer cool, prosaic commercial ones, reorient the building, and give it an ethnic heritage to match its Islamic function. At the center of the wall is the Mihrab; to its right an elegant Minbar, or pulpit reaches into the room with a narrow stairway over which a skin of the same tiles is stretched. Their lively, complex, interwoven ornament is posed against an otherwise hushed, empty space. The streets of Brooklyn evaporate. In evoking the traditional ani-

conic arts of Ottoman Turkey, the tiles provide a focus of common identity for this primarily Turkish Muslim community, creating an alternate visual world that would provide a reminder to these integrated Turkish Americans of their common identity in this complex city. In interviews, however, I could find no sense of imperiled identity, or fear of over assimilation which this architecture might be meant to defy. Primarily middle class and urbane, this congregation includes a large number of professionals and a significant proportion of second and third generation Turkish-Americans. Far from feeling embattled, this embrace seems rather a stimulus response to an American attitude towards ethnicity, one particularly treasured in the cosmology of New York City. The magazine published by the mosque, Fetih, includes community news, articles concerning issues of faith and Islamic life, as well as illustrated features concerning historical monuments of Turkish-Islamic culture. It is possible that traditional architectural form at Fatih Camii reflects a congregation whose entitlement to American cultural identity can extend to the exteriorizing of their ancestral home. The second mosque to display historical tradition in a conscious way is the Bosnian Cultural Center in Queens, a two family home decorated by Bosnian and Hercegovinian carpenters to approximate a traditional Bosnian timber interior.

Led by an energetic board that includes businessmen, computer specialists, and construction workers, the house was converted into a mosque and cultural center with meeting rooms, lodging for the Imam and students, and a garden where congregants meet. Two floors have been cleared for prayer, and in each plaster partition walls have been replaced by stained wooden columns and exposed beams, while all of the interior's original wood finish and details were stripped and finished by community members. Hamo Hurla made a lacquered Minbar and Kursi, or book stand, in the form of Minbars he had seen "at home", and he is planning a wooden Mihrab in the same style. But here again, tradition was not posed against assimilation in American culture, Shura members explained: but against its obliteration in a culturally cleansed Bosnia. "First you need only a place to pray for everyone, not just for Bosnians," Imam Bayram Mulic explained. "...but then if you can it is important to make the mosque nice." The Imam wants in particular to reach Bosnian immigrants and refugees who grew up in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, and were raised as part of a secular state. "They believed they could have Bosnian tradition without Islam. But there is no artistic or architectural tradition, no cultural

Bosnian tradition without religion. There is no secular tradition that you can separate from Islam. And in the end there is only Allah."¹²

4. The Dome

"This building was conceived to receive visitors," Imam Osman of the Islamic Cultural Center points out in a matter of fact way. "...We are in America now, where people are interested in judging people through their architecture. This is not really our way. But I think that this can be seen as a new era for the mosque. Since this is America the mosque should be made in an architectural language that Americans understand. But that has nothing to do with Islam. " "The Dome", Imam Osman added, unprompted, "has no meaning."¹³ "One of the only things we really stipulated that we wanted," a representative of the Cultural Center's building committee told me pointedly "was the dome. We just thought there ought to be a dome; that here the dome was the form by which Islam might immediately be recognized."¹⁴ There are no universal architectural forms understood in predominantly Muslim populations to represent pan-Islamic tradition; in Islamic countries throughout the world, the dome does not stand as a sign for

Islam. Its widescale use can be particularly associated with the great empires of Safavid Iran, Mughal India, and Ottoman Turkey, but even in those places domes are understood to distinguish monuments that carry the names of great governments or patrons, and to bear the mark of their piety and authority. Community mosques—the vast majority of mosques—in these and other countries, only sporadically employ the dome. And for many of the countries represented in the 'ummah of the Islamic Cultural Center, the dome does not figure as a traditional form in mosque architecture at all. The notion that the dome might be a universal signifier for Islam is one conceived and nurtured in the Euro-American tradition. It was born in 18th and 19th century Europe of a reductive and Orientalist construct, one that projected onto the skyline of Istanbul or Isfahan a sensuality and irrationality that would not be admitted into the rational urban profile with which Europe had begun to imagine itself. Irrationality is, of course, not an intrinsic property of domes, in Islamic countries or outside of them. Here, at the Islamic Cultural Center, the massing of the dome owes much to the clear and hierarchical massing of Ottoman mosques. But the dome of the Islamic Cultural Center is further conceived as a rational form in the modernist sense, one whose construction is revealed with a kind of austere lucidity through the juxtaposition of glass and opaque support. It is this modernist gloss



Masjid Abu Bakr Sediq, Flushing, Queens

Masjid Al Abdin, Richmond Hills, Queens



Muslim World Day Parade



Masjid Al Abdin, Richmond Hills, Queens

Masjid Al Abidin, Richmond Hills, Queens



Medina Masjid, New York City

on an Orientalist theme that seeks to reinvent the Dome for its new community, its new audience. As a building, the mosque of the Islamic Cultural Center was intended, not only to serve its community, but also to meet the gaze of non-Muslims.

It is the most opulent of New York's mosques, unique for having been financed, not only by its community, but by a consortium of Islamic governments as well. Designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, it was conceived by a larger group than its ummah, its community, to represent Islam in New York. The use of the dome was calculated to be a sign, a marker informed by the expectations of Western tradition. Indeed, the dome has become the favored expression of diaspora mosques, a fact both Gulzar Haidir and Renata Holod have articulated recently.¹⁵ But are these all images configured as outward looking, without particular meaning for the mosques' primary patrons? To understand how these meanings are made, I think it is necessary to explore, not only the new built mosques of mature, established communities, but mosques that might be argued to represent the interests of American and Immigrant Muslims at different social and economic stages in their community histories.

In many growing communities in New York City a series of more layered, complex meanings are being formed around the dome. At Masjid Al Abidin in the Richmond Hills section of Queens a single family home became the initial mosque to serve this community of recent Guyanese immigrants. In the course of about a decade, the adjacent house was purchased, and a permit was obtained to expand the first building. Three separate enlargements occurred in the course of 16 years, as the Guyanese community became a growing and prosperous presence in Richmond Hill. The mosque today has five domes.

In an interview with Shura council members, I asked why they had included the Domes. Were they meant to evoke the swelling Domes of Guyana in New York? "Really," came the response, "this architecture does not concern us. It has nothing to do with the past; it does not reflect any idea or decision. The dome was the choice of the man who paid for the renovation. That is all."¹⁶

On one of a number of subsequent visits to Masjid al Abidin, a member of the Shura spoke to me after prayer, and said, in passing, "The dome, if it has to mean anything, perhaps it could mean the Dome of the Rock." Like the Kaaba, the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina are buildings that belong to, and have meaning for, all Muslims.

They appear in posters that adorn nearly every mosque in New York. These buildings are also the subject of the only floats in the Muslim World Day Parade: evocations of a community which must be represented through spaces and ideas rather than people and narratives. There is no doubt for the congregants of the Masjid al Abidin that the association of their domes with these buildings was an afterthought: a response to my question. But their response was also part of a willingness to enter into the discourse which sees architecture as possibly reflecting a collective identity, and most importantly, part of a kind of repossession, a reinvention of their domes.

Indeed, makeshift, ad hoc versions of the dome are rapidly becoming the marker for mosques in the five boroughs, regardless of the ethnicity of the community. At Gawsiah Jame Masjid in Astoria, a silhouetted dome cut out of plywood marked, until recently, the door of a mosque housed in a small commercial building, and the Masjid Baitul Mukarram in Queens is signaled only by a dome and minaret painted on the alley wall which serves as its entrance. Even the bare loft windows of Masjid Farooq in Brooklyn are adorned with little contact paper domes, which mark the direction of the qibla. I wonder if what we are seeing is the emergence of series of new meanings for the dome which are both layered and dynamic. The dome, emerging from ethnic traditions or from the Western imagination, is slowly being recoded in certain New York immigrant communities—through reference to monuments like the Dome of Rock which have reference and meaning for all Muslims. Perhaps we are witness to the invention of a tradition to accomplish something which was not necessary in the Islamic countries of origin of many of these communities: it is coming to represent the presence of Islam for New York

Muslims "whose links," the community leader Dawd Assad has said, "supercede national identities." That the dome has no single meaning in the architecture of New York's Muslim community is clear. And in particular, the kind of divergent histories and experiences that create these converging interpretations can be revealed through the dome of the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 116th Street in Manhattan. Today Masjid Malcolm Shabazz occupies the former site of Lenox Casino, on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 116th streets. The casino had been reused as Muhammed's Temple of Islam, a center of worship for adherents of the Nation of Islam. Destroyed in 1965 after the death of Malcolm X, it was rebuilt in its present form, and continued to serve as a temple. Under the leadership of Warith Deen Muhammed the congregation converted to Sunni Islam in 1975, and so joined the orthodox Islamic congregations that form the focus of this study. Masjid Malcolm Shabazz is the center of a lively Ummah which supports a private parochial school: the Sister Clara Muhammed School, and a number of community and social services that serve families, children, the sick and the elderly of the neighborhood. Leaders of the Mosque, among whom is its principal Imam, Izak-el M. Pasha, have also been instrumental in developing urban renewal initiatives in the neighborhood, projects which, it is hoped, will contribute to the economic revitalization of the area: they are involved in plans to initiate the construction of public housing and housing for the elderly in the same important Harlem intersection where the mosque itself stands. Masjid Malcolm Shabazz occupies a three-story corner building constructed in brick and faced with panels that frame two floors of large, arched windows. Its plump, carnavalesque onion shaped dome occupies its roof with a certain amount of authority, despite a character and materials that are anomalous in the neighborhood. It is in fact the incongruence of the dome and arches that give them power: they are potent reminders of the presence of Muslims in the neighborhood, Muslims as a divergence from a hopeless norm, from a rectilinear street wall more often than not pocked with the cavernous windows of abandoned housing stock. There is a strong feeling in the community that the presence of the distinctive

mosque building in what is a torn and wounded urban context is part of the mosque's healing role. "Sometimes a real down and out type will come down Lenox Avenue" Assistant Imam Kareem said one Friday before Juma, "dragging his feet, his shoulders hunched; maybe he's got a bottle in a paper bag... but then he'll catch sight of the dome our mosque, and he'll stop a second, he'll remember how much pride the Muslims have in this neighborhood, and you'll see him straighten right up; for a block or two he'll walk tall as he passes the Masjid." For community members, this broad, silver dome interrupts the conventional but bruised profile the blocks Lenox Avenue and suggests hope in a neighborhood that has in the past been rent with the architectural witness of urban despair: empty lots and abandoned and deteriorating buildings. At Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, the Dome comes to represent the separate identity of this community of Muslims within their neighborhood. Purposeful architectural anomaly becomes a declaration of the congregation's capacity to transform and heal the very urban fabric. As much as this might be the case, Imam Kareem is not content with the Masjid's dome. He explains that "it reflects what people used to think Islam was about. They have more to do with an old-fashioned American interpretation of what Islamic Architecture looked like, or with Ottoman architecture than with Islam in general. We have lately become interested in an architectural style that reflects the African heritage of many in our community," Imam Izak El-Pasha explains, as he reveals plans for housing the mosque hopes to help develop in the neighborhood. "This dome has served us well, but we are thinking that in our next mosque we might turn to West-African Islamic forms; to an architecture that better reflects the background of many in our community," Imam Kareem adds. He showed me a drawing of a pavilion-like structure with multiple supports... and with no dome. At Masjid Malcolm Shabazz an American Orientalist Dome was exploited as a subverted image of marginality: just as early African American Muslims subverted the conventional image of black inferiority, until divergence became a point of pride. In time the community is rejecting the reductive image

of otherness quite specifically, for architectural forms that can articulate a more particular, but less polarized identity. At Masjid al Bidin, in the same city, a dome initially drawn as part of traditional forms from a Guyanese homeland, is reinvented in time, so that it comes to represent

a new common identity for American Muslims. The only sporadically relenting, cavernous rectilinearity of New York's skyline creates a context that imbues any dome with enormous meaning and power. In New York's urban and epistemological skyline, the Dome quivers like the difference between us; be its meanings traditional allusion, common identity, or Orientalist reduction, the dome, it seems, must be worked through in the new world marriage of Muslims and New York.

Muslim New York
Whether prosperous or poor; assimilated, insular or marginalized the some 400,000 Muslims of the mosques of New York are participating incrementally in the rebuilding of their city's urban fabric. Islam can no longer be other to the experience of being a New Yorker: can no longer be visualized through the glass of an opulent palace in Kuwait; of televised videos of the night sky in Iraq, or through the domes of Disney's "Agrabah". It is not a process we can curate or control. It is rather possible that in this moment we are all part of the collaborative expansion of the vision which continues the creation of our city; of the dynamic transformation of an urban setting conceived by the Euro-American imagination into a pluralistic urban vision which takes into account the working through of New York identities, both American and Muslim.

1 The project has involved the dedicated collaboration of Khader Humled, Khidir Abdalla, Leila Bahbahani, Numreen Qureshi and Justin Weiner. 2 The present study is limited to orthodox Islamic communities—both Suna and Shiite, and does not include discussion of mosques founded by the Nation of Islam or other groups whose basic ideologies diverge from those of conventional Islam. 3 Aljumuah, Madison, Wisconsin, Vol. 7, issue 6, 6-B. 4 Previous studies concerning the Islamic communities of New York are few. See: Marc Ferris, "To 'Achieve the Pleasure of 'Allah': Immigrant Muslim Communities in New York City 1893-1991," (in) Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, eds., Muslim Communities in North America, Albany, 1994, 209-230; Susan Siyomovics, "The Muslim World Day Parade and 'Storefront' Mosques of New York City," (in) Making Muslim Space in North American and Europe, ed., Barbara Daly Metcalf, Berkeley, in press; "New York City's Muslim World Day Parade," (in) Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora, ed., Peter Van der Veer, Philadelphia, 1995, 157-77. Concerning Muslim Communities in North America ground-breaking work has been done in particular by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (Muslim Communities in North America; and Islamic Values in the United States [with Adair T. Lummis], New York, 1987, among others. 5 Some newer congregations still tightly bound by linguistic and economic limitations felt apprehensive that our visits were actually in response to possible building code and zoning violations. 6 Imam Muhammed Rahman, Masjid al Aman, Queens, November, 1993. 7 Congregant, Warren Street Mosque, Manhattan, November, 1993. 8 Imam Muhammed Rahman, 1993. 9 Dr. Hafiz, Masjid al Falah, January, 1994. 10 James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art., Cambridge, 1988, 1-7 ("The Pure Products Go Crazy"). 11 Susan Siyomovics, "The Muslim World Day Parade and 'Storefront' Mosques of New York City," in press. 12 Imam Bayram Mulic, April, 1994. 13 Imam Osman, Islamic Cultural Center, Manhattan, October, 1994. 14 Interview, Manhattan, June, 1993. 15 Gulzar Haidir (in) Making Muslim Space in North American and Europe, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf, Berkeley, in press; Renata Holod in a lecture delivered at M.I.T., November, 1995. 16 Imam Sattur, Masjid al Bidin, February, 1993.

revival groups such as The Journeymen, The Kingston Trio, and Peter, Paul, and Mary, students from the mosque school offered their rewritten chorus: "A way of life, a way of life, Islam is a way of life." The original American verses speak of the adventure, the poverty, and the romance of the lonesome road that never reverts back home, as in: "If you miss the train I'm on / You will know that I have gone / You can hear the whistle blow five hundred miles / Not a shirt on my back / Not a penny to my name / Lord I can't go back home this-a-way." New Muslim lyrics make a different use of the metaphor of life as a road when worshippers sang in the mosque: "Do you

know what Islam says? / It says life's a big, big chance / It says that life is a far road space / Return upon rest." The melody, a kind of architectural framework, is American, but the words are not. Conclusions Mosques must take on multiple roles, roles which juxtapose two notions of community: first, a traditional community evoked by the architectural form of a mosque and second, the creation of an elective community formed by the streets and neighborhoods of the American city. A New York city mosque simultaneously houses a traditional community steaming from a shared religious heritage, but also an elective community of voluntarily

associated members — in this instance, the West Indians, Indians, and West Africans of the Bronx. The mosque serves as a social club for many residents in the immediate neighborhood (an elective community) but also celebrates the Prophet's birthday (the traditional Muslim community). Numerous activities, a school, religious rites, and an organization are also used to create an elective community of voluntarily associated members who comply with state rules for non-profit clubs. The traditional structure, the mosque, must be sustained by the edifice of elective communities in the form of

a voluntary association bureaucracy. Sunnat-ul-Jamaat mosque may have begun as a traditional, all-male Muslim place of prayer. But the American mosque has evolved as a social club for families and a local community center, a place for children to play and families to celebrate American holidays. It provides a place for recreational activities but more than that it provides emotional sustenance through the development of close personal relations and social solidarity. The mosque is not necessarily a replacement for family, kinship, and neighborhood groups presumably eroded by the forces of urbanization. Instead the mosque in America may enhance or work to strengthen and enlarge tradi-

tional social units such as the family. Finally, a mosque is not just a symbol but also a building with local architectural presence and ethnic resonance. Within its walls, the potential effect of mixing urban, elective communities with traditionally structured figurations is still to be measured, as is the degree to which these mosques, acting as voluntary associations, aid individuals to identify their political interests, to practice their religion, to attain their cultural objectives, and to protect their group's rights.



Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Mosque, Bronx
Photos: Susan Slyomovics



1 Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Knopf, 1945), vol. 1, p. 198. Subsequent quotes are from this edition, reprinted from the 1835 imprint. 2 See my "Adult Play: New York City's Ethnic and Social Clubs," in *Encyclopedia of Ethnic American Literature and Arts*, ed. George Leonard (New York: Garland, in press). Based on my fieldwork, I describe four organizations: 1) the Pontian Society, a Greek social club in Queens, 2) the Dominican Club Deportivo in Washington Heights, 3) the African-American Brooklyn Elite Checker Club, and 4) the Jewish First Marmarosh Young Men's Aid Society. 3 Susan Slyomovics, "New York City's Muslim World Day Parade," in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995):157-177. 4 Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1964), n.p. 5 Renata Holod, University of Pennsylvania, 1992. 6 Levent Akbarut, "The Role of Mosques in America," *Markaz: Journal of the Muslim Center of New York* (Groundbreaking Special Number) 12:10-12 (Reprinted from *The Minaret*, November-December 1986). 7 This description of the Sunnat-ul-Jamaat mosque is a shorter version of my article, "The Muslim World Day Parade and 'Storefront' Mosques of New York City," in *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press), in press.

by
Susan
Slyomovics

Comparing the Mosques to New York City's Ethnic and Social Clubs

American Voluntary Associations and the Mosque During his travels around America in the 1830s, Alexis de Toqueville, a French aristocrat, noted a proliferation of social and civic organizations in the new world. In his book that recounts these voyages, *Democracy in America*, he wrote: "In no country of the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America."¹ He observed that though monarchies may rely upon the exertions of a wealthy and powerful individual to achieve monumental undertakings, "among democratic nations all the citizens are independent and feeble, powerless if they do not help one another" (p. 115). Toqueville concluded that "the art of associations becomes the mother of action," (p. 116) especially in a democratic society which must now artificially create and nurture social and gregarious groupings. What was a characteristic pattern of nineteenth century American life established by early immigrants and noted by Toqueville continues to be reflected in the hometown societies, mutual aid, and immigrant fraternal organizations of New York City in the post-1965 period when changes in the immigration laws encouraged the latest influx. Among contemporary New York City's immigrant population, diverse ethnic groups often choose to institutionalize their own associations by providing an architectural setting within which they may pursue either political (i.e. instrumental) or leisure-time (i.e. expressive) activities. New York City's social and ethnic clubs have traditionally provided a metaphorical "home" in which and in reference to which diverse immigrant groups have, through various recreational activities, organized their social and cultural adaptations to a strange, and often estranging urban environment. Sicilian hometown clubs and Greek fraternal associations, as examples of ethnic and social clubs,

are housed in numerous single family homes, lofts, and storefronts scattered throughout the districts of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn and Astoria, Queens respectively.²

An additional urban example of an architectural form associated with a newer "ethnic" group is the mosque. I have argued elsewhere that Muslims in New York City are perceived by New Yorkers as another ethnic minority in our colorful urban mosaic, despite Muslim self-assertions of belonging to a religious grouping. I conjectured that in relation to the annual "Muslim World Day Parade," a festive display and march down Lexington Avenue each September, Muslims of New York City, in order to attain political and economic power, are reconfiguring religion into ethnicity to take advantage of the discourse of ethnicity.³ This is because both the march of the "Muslim World Day Parade" and "storefront" mosques are collective activities that construct and present images of Islam in the city to non-Muslim New Yorkers.

A storefront mosque comes under the rubric of "non-pedigreed architecture," a label designating the "vernacular, anonymous, spontaneous, indigenous constructions of the informal, undocumented sector."⁴ By examining buildings devoted to Islam, we gain insight into specific political and organizational activities that promote symbolic modes of expression for an emerging Muslim community. At the same time, to renovate, maintain or even construct a mosque requires that an association of people articulate the task of developing together certain common interests based on respect for the thing they love (according to the famous formulation of Toqueville). Then from this basic fact of human social existence, a voluntary association is formed. Moreover, a voluntary association is not only a group of people organized for a common purpose and brought about by the will of its individual members, but it is also a group of people acting independently of government imposition.

Similarly, what characterizes the establishment of a mosque is a

group of people sharing the same religious beliefs who freely choose to pray together. Art historian Renata Holod has described the minimum architectural requirements of a mosque for an embryonic community: there must be an oriented wall, a shaded area and a large unencumbered space for overflow. Holod then distinguishes between this primordial moment of the community (or umma) when all Muslims stand together versus the historical moment of constructing a building.⁵ In the case of the contemporary historical moment — the era when storefront mosques have emerged in America — if we imagine Muslims as a voluntary association (in the manner of Toqueville and his appreciation of an American grassroots gregariousness), the mosque interpreted as a voluntary association conforms to patterns of sociability and interaction that already shaped the experience of nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrant social and ethnic clubs. Therefore, the storefront mosque also embodies its very presence in an architectural form for two reasons, one responding to tradition, and the other, to urban America: a mosque is not only the Muslim community's expression of presence but a mosque also satisfies the need experienced by Muslim immigrants in New York City to serve their sociable ends characteristically promoted among other ethnic groups by voluntary associations, fraternal societies and social clubs. Like the building itself, the association of people who build, inhabit, and decorate a mosque is subject to a cycle that describes the history of Muslim immigration to New York City. The mosque emerges from an urbanite existence in which the bonds of extended family are weakened, while at the same time the effects of immigration and urbanization register on immigrant Muslim communities and their respective expres-

sive cultures. As an example of the aspirations of many immigrant Muslims who have organized mosques in America, an article written by Levent Akbarut best articulates the complex forces propelling the proliferation of mosques, first as "storefront" renovations, eventually as purposeful architectural constructions. Akbarut's thoughts appeared in the November-December issue of *The Minaret*, a widely circulating newspaper based in Orange County California. When the author discusses the role of the mosque in America, he employs terms which substitute traditional, involuntary kin groups, such as family, with new, city-based, created communities that reproduce a semblance of kinship ties. Akbarut argues that the American mosque needs to be a school because urban schools are substandard, a community center because the streets are dangerous, and a locus of political activity, such as voter registration drives, so that Muslims will have a say in the decision-making processes of this country. Quoting a saying or hadith from Al-Bukhari, the author acknowledges that "a mosque within the confines of four walls and a ceiling is not a requirement for a Muslim community to offer prayer, because God has made the whole earth a sanctuary for worship." Why then, he asks, did the Prophet build a mosque during the Medinan era? The answer is that the mosque functioned as a center for Islamic affairs and organization and thereby nurtured the Islamic effort. This example should be kept in mind by Muslims seeking to establish Islam in America.⁶ Creating a Mosque in the Bronx: Sunnat-ul-Jamaat⁷ What Akbarut envisions as the future of the mosque in America is reflected in aspirations shared by the founders of one mosque, Sunnat-ul-Jamaat of the Bronx. Their mosque is an example of transforming a structure designed for other purposes into an acceptable mosque. At the same time, such a Muslim place of prayer functions consciously according to a model outlined for voluntary associations or social and ethnic clubs: new relationships and associations linked to urban American societies have been adapted from traditional settings and patterns. For

example, the exterior structure of the mosque exhibits the same architecture as the surrounding three-story townhouses. In its interior, the mosque exhibits a sharp contrast to surrounding homes and buildings whose individual, private apartments discourage the sociability and circulation of people involved in a communal religious event. The entrance to the mosque is marked as sacred space by a sign in English and Arabic: "O God, open to me your doors of mercy" (photo). Interior walls and partitions have been gutted: as in other American mosques, masking tape guidelines run the length of the floor to orient worshippers to Mecca. This is Sunnat-ul-Jamaat mosque, established in the Bronx at 24 Mount Hope Street between Walton and Jerome Avenues, called officially the "Islamic Sunnat-ul-Jamaat." It was created by Guyanese immigrants of Indian Muslim descent whose native language is English. They began in a basement on the Grand Concourse in 1978 and purchased a three-storey single-family building in 1988 for \$45,000. The building next door was for sale and they planned to buy it in order to be able to accommodate three to four thousand worshippers (although they counted five hundred paying members). Most are from Guyana; there is a minority of West Africans. On Sunday October 7th, 1990, they convened to celebrate two events: *mulid an-nabi*, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, the traditional world-wide religious day of all Muslims, and the annual general meeting and election of mosque officers. A general meeting to hold elections complies with New York state rules for non-profit voluntary organizations and combines religious Muslim ritual with secular, financial and organizational business in a peculiar, very American amalgam. At the same time, for new immigrants, the mosque has provided a friendly, sociable setting in which to practice leadership techniques, marshal political support, and explain voting procedures and symbols. The event was videotaped by the community to serve as a souvenir and copies were sent back to families in Guyana. The four-hour celebration ended with a homecooked meal combining Indian, West Indian, and West African cuisine. The women ate indoors and upstairs, and the men outside. Songs accompanying the festivities borrowed American folk melodies but added appropriate new lyrics. For example, to the tune of "Five Hundred Miles," made famous in the 1960s by folk

NY Masjid:
Finding a New
Meaning

by
Khidir
Abdalla

Last Saturday I sat on the dentist chair full of anxiety and charged with apprehension. The dentist stood next to me and started a conversation. She said: Sunday is Eid, what are your plans? Nothing major, I answered her. She persisted with another question: Will you make sacrifice? I said with a ghost of smile on my face "I am not going to, because I am single." She asked: Do you have to be married to make sacrifice? I said: yes. She said: you would know better than me. I detected apologetic tone in her voice and it bothered me, just because I speak Arabic she assumed I would know about Islam better than her, she was Muslim too. I explained to her that perhaps I do not know more than her. My explanation encouraged her and she pursued with more questions. Do you pray five times a day?. Usually I would answer "I used to," but this time I simply said: No. She continued "do you at least pray in the morning?". I said: No. She gave up questioning and she said with a sincere voice: "You should at least pray in the morning. It helps, especially in this country." I was speechless, except for the part when she started pulling my teeth. On the way home all I could think of was my conversation with that dentist, a young Muslim woman from India. She felt a compelling desire to talk to me about religion when we could have any other conversation, or none at all. Why would prayers help in this country? Is this the reason thousands of Muslims gathered for prayers in mosques across New York City? Is this the compelling reason why they devote their time and energy to create sacred places for those prayers? Is this the

reason why thousands of New Yorkers collect their effort to buy buildings and build mosques? Is it to help themselves feel comfortable in this country? Is it to find home away from home?. Perhaps converting people and buildings make them feel home and part of family. Perhaps prayers remind them of their existence, in a country that does not leave time to remember any thing. Perhaps architecture stands witness to their identity, reminder of places they once knew, and torch of hope that will keep them living, away from home. The thoughts chased me to sleep. In my sleep I saw high walls made out of green brick and resembled the walls of Omdurman prison in Khartoum. The walls surrounded a huge yard, and a group of people gathered in the middle of the yard, I was standing in the yard away from them. I attempted to climb the high walls to see the outside. Whenever I succeeded to climb out of the yard, men with foreign features who spoke English hunt me with guns. They chased me everywhere trying to kill me. Only one man came to my aid and tried to stop them from shooting me. He was a tall man who looked like the Indian dentist, and spoke Arabic. He tried to hide me from them but they were too many. Finally I gave up and surrendered to them. I started weeping and I asked them to shoot me. I woke up from my sleep with tears in my eyes, sad and confused I started my new day. Last night I went to Masjid Taqua Wa Jihad to meet with the Imam. Sadness was still lingering in my heart. I had not yet, cleared my mind of that strange dream. The thoughts that dentist invoked were still plaguing my mind. My personal dilemma influenced the way I contribute to this project. I was supposed to study the architecture of New York mosques. I could not help engaging my self into other

issues, dangerous issues. issues that I should deal with on my own. I felt a little ashamed of my self, and I promised my self to concentrate on architecture. "Tonight is my last chance," I told my self. "I will only talk to them about design and will only offer my service." Questions continued to rise to the surface of my conscious. "What if they expect more from me?". "Should I explain to them what I go through?". "Does my personal convictions have any affect on what I could offer, a mosque design scheme?". I jumped into a taxi escaping from the questions. "This meeting is to discuss renovation of a building, this is the way it would be." Before the meeting Imam Fa'iz started a conversation with me. We talked about their mosque in particular and Islam in general. He was very personable and I found myself talking about myself. I confessed to him that I am not what is considered a good Muslim. I am not doing the mosque any favor by helping them. All I wanted was to find home in them. He smiled and said: "No one is perfect, we are all trying to be good Muslims. We are only human, humans are bound to make mistakes. It was the blessing of Allah you came to help us." Afterwards the meeting started and the Head Imam explained to Khader and me their design intentions. He explained that their building was Boys Home before the community bought it. They intend to keep the same idea and create "a Muslim YMCA" to bring in Muslim and non Muslim youth. The main idea is to create a community center within the mosque to help developing the human potential of Muslims and non Muslims. They want the mosque to be a place that youth could use to build positive life for themselves. The

community of the mosque will raise funding to realize this dream. I was delighted with what they told us. This old building will give new life to the neighborhood. The building will lend its structure to be adapted for a new purpose, higher purpose. The building will have a new significance, it will be more important than it used to be. "When prophet Mohammed conquered Mecca, he did not demolish the Kaaba. He ordered the idols inside it to be destroyed. He kept the structure, nevertheless he changed the message by changing what was inside. He did not build the Kaaba but he gave it a new meaning," the thought crossed my mind. "The Kaaba was a room, simple room. It was architecture, simple architecture. It served a holy purpose and that what made it sacred architecture," another thought. I walked with Khader outside the building. I stood for a moment to look at the building. It looked handsome and magnificent. I was replenishing my eyes with its sight like a traveler preparing his provisions for a long journey, only my journey would not be long. I will come back soon to visit the building again. I walked with Khader in the direction of Yankee Stadium. The moon was shining over the stadium, sending its silver beams to it like love poems sent by adoring lover. I thought of the moon and me that night as two lovers, both in love with buildings. I was in love with the Masjid Taqua Wa Jihad building. We walked towards the subway station. Khader was babbling about something but I was not there, my soul was not there, it was in higher grounds. The night was beautiful and a building just touched my heart. Then I understood the meaning of what the dentist had told me. Only then I understood why was it so important to look for help in prayers, especially in this country. I was extremely happy to find a new way of praying.

New York Masjid:
Architecture and Convictions
I envy people of the affluent West. I wish our countries were wealthier than theirs, more advanced and economically independent. I wish our language were the language of science and technology. I wish they looked up to us the same way we look up to them for technological guidance and leadership. Nonetheless I must admit that I believe we, people of the impoverished East, have so much in common with them. Regardless of our apparent differences we have fundamental similarities. We are both human. We both try to realize certain dreams and make sense of our existence. We both strive to live with dignity and respect. We both seek serenity. We both have to face our fears and pursue comfort in the company of fellow human beings. We both have among us the poor and the wealthy, the strong and the weak, the contented and the tormented. There are many of us, Muslims from the East, who come to the West searching for new beginning. We come to seek refuge from the tyranny of our rulers and the misery of our countries' poverty. We search for peace and tranquillity apart from the differences in cultural beliefs that surround us when we arrive. We, as humans, find comfort in taking the journey of life with human beings who share our fears, hopes and dreams. For most of us New York lends hand and offers home. We find in it our own people to welcome us and accept us into their communities. Communities that kept the flavor of the home land to ease the dreadful feeling of isolation that overwhelms new immigrants. Similar to the home land communities, mosques are the

Ammar Ibn Yassir Mosque, Brooklyn



Malcom Shabazz Masjid, New York City



Masjids where I grew up, in Palestine, seemed to have different ways to revealing themselves. I remember that at times I would know about one from its minaret or another form the feeling of its mass within the narrow city streets... or just from the door signs. I couldn't imagine how this Bronx mosque would look. To get to Masjid Taqwa Wa Jihad I took a 13 bus from Washington Heights. It crossed the river into the Bronx, mounted the hill slowly as we passed public housing projects and boarded, half-charred buildings. I kept to the front of the bus, my eyes open, looking. I kept asking the passenger next to me where the mosques was. Are we there? I felt almost apprehensive, not knowing what I would see, how a mosque would appear in this place. I was a little cautious, anxious that I might get lost in a neighborhood with a dark reputation. The passenger had said: "Get off at the next stop, just walk down the hill and you will see it." I walked the whole street, scanning both sides for some indicator that a mosque might be found there. I had almost given up when, at the bottom of the hill I saw a sign hanging on the side of a great box of a building. It said Masjid Taqwa Wa Jihad in a graffiti front, and was crowned with Arabic writing.

The brick building had no real front door; it was three to four stories high. There was no facade, no street entrance. I walked around the mosque and found a narrow stair that drew me two flights up. There I came up against a potent detail: a few pair of shoes left to the side of the stair case. Only then I knew I was in the right building. I took my shoes off and I walked the corridor to a security volunteer, who said "Salaam Alikum". I asked if I could talk to the Imam. The Imam was not there. I explained that I was an architectural draftsman helping to document New York mosques, and asked if I could see, just the interior of the musallah, the prayer hall. I walked down the corridor adjacent to a hall decorated with yellow arches and plants. The prayer hall was simple, austere: a rectangular room qiblated with a Mihrab. The sense of familiarity came not from architecture but almost from its absence. I began to feel as if I had entered a mosque. I ask myself often what Masjid TaqwaWa Jihad could have in common with the small mosque in my neighborhood in Nablus. That mosque was also very simple; with no significant architectural windows. I remember carpeting on the floor with tight strings to organize the rows of believers at prayer time. The day after I went to Taqwa Wa Jihad was a Wednesday. I found myself waiting for prayer. It was Asar, the three o'clock prayer which on a weekday produces very few people in a mosque. There were no more than three or four here. The Imam was out, one of the congregation called the prayer. We formed the line. I was at first put off, following a young convert in the course of prayer. But I was a follower; my prayer was true. I was one with each of them. It may even be the sense of a line when praying that finally made me feel the Masjid Taqwa Wa Jihad was a mosque.

I wonder if my feeling could be analyzed and simplified into geometric forms and spatial relationships. Or that my relation to the building is tied so irrevocably to what occurs within; perhaps it is so unquantifiable as to be termed a spiritual experience. Perhaps the mosque became a mosque only in the moment I joined the prayer.

I visited the mosque several times more, and I started to associate myself with its space more closely. I realized that I have a favorite spot where I liked to sit. I started feeling part of its community. On the other hand I was still an architect: a stance that somehow implied a distance; I was, after all, trained to be analytical about architectural experience. I had an impulse to cry out that this was not one of the great mosques of Islam. This building will never appear in history books or architecture texts. Then I just stopped, stopped questioning brick and mortar and began instead to listen to the prayers. The building dematerializes. It may be that a mosque is first a space in the Muslim imagination; that buildings are just an attempt to contain it. I thought that in Taqwa Wa Jihad it is not materials or markers that give buildings meaning but rather the collective experience which gives meaning to the place.

by
Khader
Humied
Masjid Taqwa
Wa Jihad

core of those communities. Their physical being embodies representation of our sincere desire to feel home and safe. The majority of those mosques were typical commercial or residential New York buildings that had undergone architectural metamorphosis. Whether those buildings were originally designed for residential or commercial purposes their new function had strong impact on them. Their new function transformed them into divine spaces, into mosques. Their new function made them icons of communities. The interiors of those buildings were gut renovated by the patrons making simple and sincere design decisions. Similar to every other mosque in the world those mosques have qibla walls. They convey essential ideas, and they present the main cast of characters of a mosque, such as Mihrab and Minbar. With naive and metaphorical indications, such as marking a niche or drawing architectural image on the wall, they mark the Mihrab. With any material available they design and build the Minbar. The most interesting aspect of the process is the admirable creativity that brings solutions from different cultural backgrounds throughout the Muslim world. They genuinely aspire to create a mosque that transcends the reality outside its building, the reality of living in a non Muslim world. A world that is unfamiliar to some Muslims and ambiguous to the rest. A world that promises them success and delivers spiritual and economic failures. In due course mosques provoke debates and provide grounds for ideological warfare between Muslims and non Muslims. Similar to the home land mosques, they are very accessible to any preacher who would send hate messages to avenge a defeat occurred in the past of which the West is held responsible. Beyond their will mosques found themselves in the middle of war zone. Their architecture suggests mosque to Muslims, and their mere conception suggests terror cell to non Muslims. As a result tensions build up and misunderstanding grows dense between Muslims and non Muslims. Moreover, Muslims experience condemnation and non Muslims perceive impending doom, both set forth to resent each other. Architecture sends its messages but those messages are interpreted through personal beliefs and convictions. New York mosques would always be source of comfort to some people and source of fear to others. Nonetheless their existence testifies to good intentions. They are embedded peacefully into the fabric of New York. They do not ask for much recognition. They utilize what is given to them. They announce themselves with extreme modesty. We should encourage their positive contributions and eradicate the hate that stigmatized

them. They should remain houses of love, love of God and fellow human beings. They should be spiritual link between heaven and earth..

Breaking The Shell Of Solitude
 “I preferred not to say the rest that came to my mind; that just like us they are born and die, and in the journey from the cradle to the grave they dream dreams some of which come true and some of which are frustrated; that they fear the unknown, search for love and seek contentment in wife and child; that some are strong and some are weak; that some have been given more than they deserve by life, while others have been deprived by it, but that the differences are narrowing and most of the weak are no longer weak.

I approached the entrance of Masjid Al-Farooq while I was gazing at the sign that was placed on top of the entrance. I remembered the day it was hung. My friend B persuaded the shura council to obtain it. He thought it was important to have a sign that would announce the presence of the mosque.. It was to attract believers to come for prayers. I thought B wanted the sign to decorate the entrance. It was a beautiful sign written in kufic. He loved Arabic calligraphy. I stood for a while in front of the mosque, I was hesitant to enter. I was very apprehensive since that was my first visit after I left. I entered. The darkness of the lobby blinded me. A strong and unpleasant odor filled my nostrils. “I never liked this lobby,” I said to my self. It was always dark and foul-smelling. The mosque washrooms were placed next to it. “This can not be an invitation to the House of Allah,” I thought.

I went straight to the washroom, which was an ablution room as well. It was sometime before sunset, and I wanted to make wudo for the Maghreb prayer. I started my wudo, it felt very strange because I had not done it in a while. I stopped praying the five prayers a while ago. An overwhelming feeling of isolation filled my heart. “I do not belong here anymore.” I said to my self. I finished wudo and I walked up the stairs towards the main prayer hall. I opened the door. The light flooded my eyes. The qibla wall was a large window that allowed the light to pour into the hall. The hall itself was an empty space with a silly curtain towards the back to divide men and women. I took off my shoes and I left them on the shoe rack near the door. My nose was filled again with the same unpleasant odor from the lobby downstairs.

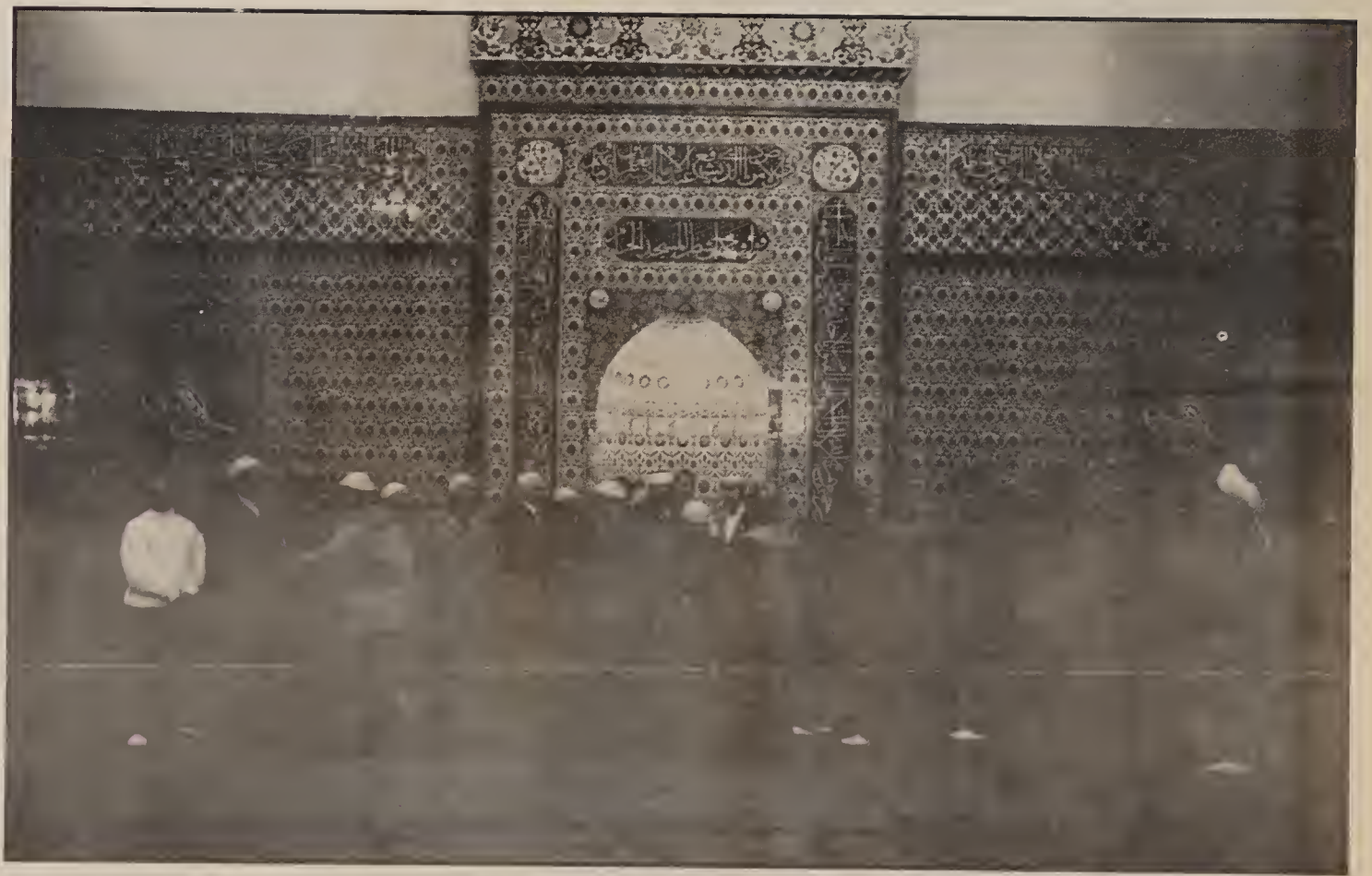
I picked a copy of the Koran, and I sat down close to the qibla wall to read it. I started reading. Suddenly, the heavy feeling of isolation that filled my heart started to wash away. I felt, as I once felt, I belonged. In the presence of Allah we all

belong. Memories started to float to the surface of my consciousness. I was once an important member of this community. I was the one who taught the children the history and the language of Islam. In their eyes I was a good Muslim. I chose not to be a good Muslim. I chose to be myself. I betrayed them and I walked away. I walked away out of fear. I was afraid to let them down. Ironically, I succeeded in letting them down and I walked away. I drowned in a sea of painful emotions. I put myself on trial. I was rescued by the call for the prayer. After the prayer, I exchanged greetings with people I knew. I explained to them about the New York Masjid project. I wanted them to like the idea. Perhaps I was seeking salvation from guilt. Perhaps I wanted to fight back the bad publicity that the mosque had received. Perhaps I wanted to do that for the good people I once knew. Perhaps I wanted to do it for my friends who had seen the light of Allah in their hearts and shared their peace and love with every one around them. I went into details about the project with some of the mosque patrons, two of them were members of the shura council. They all wondered why are we interested in this mosque. “This mosque does not represent Islamic architecture,” they said. I tried so hard to explain the social and cultural significance of a sacred space such as Al Farooq Mosque. I tried to explain, architecturally, the importance of space that houses the relationship between man and God. They looked at me while I was talking, but I was sure they were not listening. After I finished talking they told me, “Perhaps Allah chose to guide your professor to the right path by making her participate in such project.” That was good enough to light the candle of hope. Hope of starting a dialogue. Hope of understanding. Hope of accepting.

New York: Home And Exile
 Every thing made sense. From Khartoum I traveled north to visit my grand parents. The journey took half day across the Nubian desert. It started by departing from the Nile and ended by arriving at the Nile. I left the branches behind, and headed towards the roots. I loved every thing about my grand parents. Their existence stood witness of my own. I was self ensured every time I saw them. They made so much sense to me. Life made sense. Tribe made sense. Buildings made sense. Religion made sense. Allah made sense. I woke up the next morning to my arrival and went outside my grand father’s house. I had to visit all my cousins and uncles to greet them and announce my arrival, it was custom. My grand mother told me to visit my grand uncle first. He was the Imam of the village and he lived next door to my grand father. I went to his house first and

greeted my cousins. They were delighted to see me and told me that my grand uncle was in the “meseed,” the mosque compound. I walked through the door that separated the women quarters from the men quarters, past the men quarters and across the palm trees’ garden. I reached the door of the old mosque. I paused for a moment and gazed at the outside of the mosque. It was the same mosque that my ancestors built out of green brick. When the new red brick mosque was built, no one dared to think of demolishing the old one. It stood there a landmark of the past. My people believed the Muslim “jinn” used it at night to hold prayers. I entered with my right foot first. The light washed my eyes, and the space made me feel humble. It was enormous and empty space. The light was flooding from a continuous opening that created a band around the mosque walls underneath the roof. The roof it self was supported on top of the walls by huge stones. There were no windows and only three doors, one in the back and two on axis opposite to each other on both sides of the mosque. I walked across from the northern door towards the southern one. When I reached the center of the space I could not help but notice the strong axis between the mihrab and the back door. The back door was the women’s entrance to the mosque. I stood in the middle of the space engraving every detail of the mosque on my memory. That did not take long for it was a simple mosque, brilliant and humble. I knew silence will soon make way for life and laughter. Soon children will arrive to take their daily Islamic religion and Arabic language lessons from my grand uncle. They will pack this empty space with life. A feeling of tranquility filled my heart and I exited. To my left I saw the stairs that led to the top of the mosque where small space was created for the “mu’azzin” to call for prayers. Farther left were ablution troughs and large drinking water pots in a shaded room. To my right was the guest house built for strangers who pass by the village. In front of me was a shaded colonnade built to hold prayers at summer times. South to the colonnade stood a majestic brick building with a minaret. It was the new mosque. It was used to hold Friday prayers at summer times and all prayers in the winter. Across the mosque’s sahn, under a palm tree, my grand uncle was sitting on a day bed. He was wearing white robe and white turban. The white beard on his dark face gave him a noble appearance. I walked in hesitant steps towards him. I have always had mixed feelings of respect and fear towards him. He was not only the Imam

but also a powerful figure in the eyes of my people. I stood in front of him and he looked at me as if he was examining my face. Gracefully he put down the stick he was holding and gave me his hand. I saw a ghost of smile on his face and he shook my hand. He asked about my parents, my sisters and my brothers. He told me to come back for the noon prayer. I left the mosque and I walked past my grand uncle’s house towards my grand father’s house. My grand parents were waiting for me. I was home. Exile Crow fell in love with peacock, and peacock’s stroll. He wanted desperately to walk like Peacock, to be Peacock. He tried in vain to imitate the peacock but after many years of trying he only walked in a funny way, not quite crow, not quite peacock. It was neither peacock’s nor crow’s, peculiar and foolish. All laughed at him, peacocks and crows. He became very miserable and led a life of pain—without the old comforts, without the new hopes. He became insane. His own ambition drove him to misery and insanity. Perhaps he might have found happiness if he was satisfied with his own walk. This is a little the experience of exile. The first morning after my arrival in New York, I met Y. He was working in a store next to my friend’s house. I greeted him when I recognized that he was Sudanese. Without a warning I poured my heart out to him. I told him that I was very disappointed with what I had seen. I told him about the repulsive houses and the dirty streets. I told him that I thought, before I saw it, New York was a magnificent city with charming homes and stainless streets. I told him that the peacock city was not as impressive as I thought it was. He tried to cheer me up. He told me about the admirable sites he had seen in New York. He told me about the pleasant people he had encountered. He told me about the mosque he visited. At once my eyes were illuminated with delight. Did you say mosque? I asked him. He said: yes. Do you actually have a mosque here? Where is it? How far is it? How large is it? How does it look like? Does it look anything like the ones back home? When can you take me there? I overwhelmed Y with my questions. I was thirsty and hungry. The journey consumed my supplies. The expedition depleted my reserve. The desert tormented me with mirage. I seek to quench my thirst. I seek to nourish my desire. I needed oasis. I needed home. I needed to find familiar God. I needed to meet Allah. I needed to find his house.



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